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SUBJECT: WAR OF WORDS OVER DISARMAMENT PROCESS LINKED TO
IDENTIFICATION ISSUE

REF: ABIDJAN 639

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Silvia Eiriz for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Gbagbo's political party, the FPI, and Prime Minister Soro's Forces Nouvelles (FN) movement have clashed verbally over the past few weeks with the FPI insisting, once again, that disarmament be completed before elections and the Forces Nouvelles accusing the FPI of wanting to kill the Prime Minister. Sidiki Konate, FN Spokesman and Minister of Tourism, and Alain Lobognon, the Prime Minister's Communications Advisor, held a press conference to explain impediments to the disarmament process but openly accused N'Guessan of plotting to assassinate Soro. To reduce the political tension this exchange fueled, President Gbagbo met separately with FPI and FN delegations on December 9. Lobognon told Poloff that the Prime Minister has departed on vacation to ponder the way forward, but will likely insist that Gbagbo provide him with sufficient funding to carry out his job. He may also press for a new Cabinet. According to Lobognon, the FN discovered evidence three weeks ago that the FPI wants elections postponed until 2010. End Summary.

FPI Calls for Disarmament Before Elections

¶2. (U) In a speech to a religious group in late November, Mamadou Koulibaly, National Assembly President and FPI hard-liner, warned that elections cannot be organized until the FN disarm. According to press reports, Koulibaly said that without judges and law enforcement elements in the areas under the control of the FN it would be risky to have elections because anyone could proclaim himself the winner. The call for FN disarmament before elections was also taken up by FPI President Affi N'Guessan, who along with the First Lady, has made similar statements in the past (See Reftel). N'Guessan held a press conference on November 28 and, according to press reports, stated that holding elections without disarmament by the FN makes no sense and would signify the failure of the Ouagadougou Political Agreement (OPA). N'Guessan reportedly called on President Gbagbo and Prime Minister Soro to make disarmament and reunification of the country their main priority and to ensure that elections are held in a peaceful, reunified, and normal country. N'Guessan met on December 3 with SRSG Choi to discuss the status of the peace process. The press reported that N'Guessan said the FPI's main concern is the need to restore the government's authority throughout the national territory and that he told Choi that disarmament before elections is not negotiable.

FN Accuses FPI of Warmongering and Plotting PM's Assassination

¶3. (U) In response to the FPI statements, Sidiki Konate, FN Spokesman and Minister of Tourism, and Alain Lobognon, Communications Advisor to the Prime Minister, held a press conference on December 3. They noted that according to the OPA, disarmament means the merging of two armies into a new army. They stated there is no lack of will blocking disarmament, that its delay is of a financial and technical nature, and that the FN could disarm in weeks if financing was provided. They added that lack of

funding is also hampering the dismantlement of militias in government-held territory. They said the FN are working to establish a regime of unified customs and tax revenues in the areas under their control.

¶4. (U) The statements by Konate and Lobognon took on a sharper tone when they accused N'Guessan of taking extreme positions to curry favor with some elements of his party. They accused N'Guessan of maintaining armed bands to attempt to assassinate the Prime Minister and described him as a danger to the head of state and to his own political party. They said N'Guessan is perpetuating war in Cote d'Ivoire while Prime Minister Soro and President Gbagbo are working hand in hand to bring lasting peace. They warned that a "coup d'etat is being prepared against the OPA and stability in Cote d'Ivoire."

¶5. (C) Alain Lobognon, the Prime Minister's Communications Advisor, told Poloff December 9 that the statements he and Minister Konate made were carefully considered ahead of time. He said the FN had to respond because they have found that it is more difficult to resolve disagreements when they have ignored provocative statements made by the FPI. Lobognon believes that N'Guessan did not consult with Gbagbo before speaking out. He added that there is a leadership struggle in the FPI and that Gbagbo seems to have chosen Young Patriots leader Charles Ble Goude as the FPI's future leader. According to Lobognon, Ble Goude currently plays the role of messenger between the Presidency and the Prime Minister's Office. Lobognon said that Soro, unlike previous Prime Ministers, lacks the power of the purse. He said the FN believe DDR is necessary and can carry it out if the financial resources are made available.

¶6. (C) Cisse Sindou, Deputy Director of the FN Cabinet, told Poloff on December 5 that he personally found the statements made by Konate and Lobognon "too strong." He described their declarations as mere political talk and said that kind of public discourse would not continue. According to Sindou, N'Guessan wants the end of the peace process and is trying to halt the identification process. Sindou noted that disarmament in Cote d'Ivoire does not follow the classic model. He said the FN have disarmed and are awaiting the establishment of a new army. He told Poloff that both parties to the OPA are awaiting the Facilitator's decision regarding the pending military issues. (Note: A fourth protocol to the OPA, which will cover military issues - including the question of grades and ranks - is under negotiation.) He added that neither side will be totally satisfied with the decision, but both sides will have to accept it.

¶7. (C) Lobognon confirmed to Poloff that the FN are awaiting the Facilitator's final decision on the military issues, noting that the Facilitator is expected to make the announcement in January, when the CPC is tentatively scheduled to meet again. Lobognon told Poloff that in the last draft the FN reviewed, the Facilitator largely acceded to the Presidency's proposals. In response to why the FN accepted the draft, Lobognon said that the FPI had agreed that the new army would not come into existence until an elected President takes office.

FPI Calls For Suspension of Identification

¶8. (U) On December 4, one day after the FN press conference, N'Guessan met with Independent Electoral Commission (CEI) President Mambe. He told journalists that he asked the CEI to consider the possibility of suspending the identification/voter registration process in the areas under FN control. According to press reports, N'Guessan noted that the environment in the FN-held areas is conducive to corruption and fraud because of the absence of state authority.

¶9. (C) Prime Minister Soro issued a press release on December 5 noting that the identification/voter registration process

is proceeding smoothly and calling on all political actors to remain calm and to abstain from acts that endanger the OPA. Lobognon told Poloff that the Prime Minister is frustrated by CEI President Mambe's constant revision of the budget he claims to need to carry out the identification/voter registration process. Lobognon speculated that Mambe is in no rush to have elections since his position as CEI President provides him with a good living and lots of perks.

Prime Minister Pondering Way Forward

¶10. (C) Prime Minister Soro has just departed for a vacation in Italy and Lobognon told Poloff that Soro is taking some time off to ponder the way forward. According to Lobognon, 3 weeks ago the FN received information confirming that the FPI wants to delay elections until 2010. When asked if he was referring to the FPI or to President Gbagbo as well, Lobognon responded that the FPI is Gbagbo. Lobognon said one option for the Prime Minister would be resignation, but that Soro knows that is not the right choice since it would mean the end of the OPA and chaos. Lobognon said the Prime Minister will insist on having the funding he needs to carry out his job and may ask for the formation of a new government. Lobognon confirmed that the Linas-Marcoussis signatories would all be represented in such a new government, but explained that the Prime Minister, rather than the political parties, would choose the individuals to designate as Ministers. Lobognon noted that it is impossible to work with a cabinet that includes candidates for the presidency as well as candidates' campaign managers.

¶11. (C) Comment. Previous peace agreements have unraveled over issues relating to the identification process. Implementation of the OPA has now reached that stage. FPI calls for disarmament before elections make little sense at this point with the November 30 election date annulled and a new one not yet set. FN allegations that the FPI's objective is to disrupt the identification process are therefore credible, but the FN's accusations against the FPI president were so provocative that they generated widespread speculation over whether the verbal sparring between the two was real or staged. FPI stalwarts are undoubtedly frustrated by the fact that the war is technically over and the zone of confidence has been dismantled, but the FN still effectively control half the country, despite the return of most civilian officials. These same stalwarts consistently sidestep legitimate questions, however, about how the disarmament process will be financed. For their part, the FN are correct in stating that the Ivoirian government has failed to meet its commitment to finance the civil service and other reintegration programs but they have not been particularly transparent about explaining what the "taxes" they collect in the north are supporting. The FPI is clearly eager to regain control of the entire national territory, we suspect for monetary as well as political reasons, but the Forces Nouvelles are clearly not ready to disarm and hand back that control. Mistrust between the two sides is still quite high and we have probably not seen the last of the war of words over the disarmament issue. End Comment.

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